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A FIRE IN THE SNOW

CHARLES E. JEFFERSON



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A FIRE IN THE SNOW

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CHRISTMAS BUILDERS
THE CAUSE OF THE WAR

A FIRE IN THE SNOW

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A Fire in the Snow

I ONCE saw a group of boys on a chill winter morning, gathered around a fire which they had kindled in the snow. The materials for the fire had been wrested from the clutch of winter. With their naked hands the boys had dug down through the icy covering with which the recent storm had wrapped the earth, and had brought to the surface a batch of autumn leaves, dry and faded, which the wind had collected, and deposited in a convenient crevice,

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just in time for their burial by the snow. Twigs were also found, each boy secured a handful, and finally out of the heart of a huge snowdrift were dragged several branches of a tree which had died a few months before, and whose death seemed almost providential, for without it there could have been no fire in the snow. It was great sport to gather together the material, and every boy did his part. The principle of cooperation is deep embedded in the stuff which boys are made of. Like beavers they work harmoniously

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together for the accomplishment of their ends. There was such a bonfire started in the hearts of the boys while they were getting the fagots, that they were all aglow before the first twig had contributed its quota of heat to the miniature conflagration. There was a fire in the boys before there was a fire in the snow.

But a fire in the mind is not enough, and so fragments of the branches were piled on top of the twigs, the twigs having been heaped on top of the leaves, and then by the help of a small wooden

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wizard which one of the boys happened to have in his pocket, there came into existence that beautiful and mysterious phenomenon — a fire.

The fire did not mind its frigid surroundings. It was not daunted by the world's cool reception. Unlike certain people it did not surrender simply because its environment was adverse. It crackled and sputtered and sparkled, and made all sorts of good natured noises, and cut up ever so many vivacious little capers. It was as happy as it would have been on

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a balmy summer morning. It fairly danced and laughed out loud when it looked at the sun. It counted it a joke, apparently, to be permitted to hold up its head in the midst of such arctic surroundings.

But the fire was not so jubilant as the boys. They were, figuratively speaking, ablaze. And no wonder, for this was no ordinary fire. A fire in the house is one thing, a fire out of doors is another. A fire on the hearth has a beauty, but a fire in the snow has a fascination. One fire differs

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from another fire in glory. A fire in the grate is commonplace. But a fire in the snow is a spectacle. Some people would call it a miracle. It is above Nature. Nature makes snow, and Nature produces fire, but Nature, unless assisted, never mixes the two. It is only when human beings interfere with the processes of Nature, that one sees such a wonder as that of fire burning in the midst of the snow.

And so the pleasure of the boys was due in no small measure to their sense of victory over the

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routine of Nature. Boys love to do things, especially things which other people do not do. Most persons are content to light a fire in the grate: only boys kindle a fire in the snow. It is amazing that a boy has in him a force which can bring things to pass which the universe, if left to itself, could not accomplish in a million years. Boys are always doing things which older people do not attempt. And that is why to all of us on looking backward the light which lies on life's earlier years looks like enchantment.

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Heaven lay around us in our childhood because we were always building fires in the snow.

These boys did not kindle their fire because they were cold. Who ever heard of a boy being cold in winter? A boy is ashamed to make a fire in order to make himself comfortable. Boys hate to do things which are useful. They love to do things which are novel and dramatic and startling. They kindled this fire for fun. They wanted to see fire burn in the snow.

When they stood round the

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blaze, their satisfaction was more than physical. They had a bodily sensation—pleasure, and they had a mental sensation—joy. It is a joy to look into a fire even if it be a tame fire burning on a commonplace hearth. Fire, when it burns in a conventional manner, has nevertheless a mystical potency over the heart. Why, do you suppose, one's mood changes when he sits down in a big easy chair, and looks steadfastly into the face of a fire? Why does an unimaginative mortal become poetic, a fagged and disgruntled creature

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become genial, and why does a prosaic man or woman begin to dream and build castles in the air? May it not be because the logs are built of sunlight—jails as it were in which sunbeams are imprisoned, and that the sunbeams on making their escape are so hilarious that a part of their rapture is radiated into the soul? May it not be the leaping joy of the sunbeams set free which causes the heart to rejoice? We only know that fire is a magician. It stimulates the imagination. It mesmerizes the spirit. It holds

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one tight in the grip of its magical spell. And when it burns in the snow its wizardry is augmented. On the hearth it is an angel—it is an archangel in the snow. To compel the Lord of heat and the Lord of cold to sit down together—this is an audacious and romantic thing to do. To spread the red of a blaze over the white of a snowdrift, to put eggs of fire into a nest of ice, to cause the fire-fairies to dance on a floor covered with snow crystals, to toss flowers of flame upon the bleak and biting air, to extend the scep-

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ter of the fire-king over the province of frost, to create a glowing oasis of summer in the vast and freezing desert of winter—this is a mighty work which only a creature fashioned in the image of the Eternal is able to perform.

What is Christmas but a fire burning in the snow? December is a synonym for snow. It is pre-eminently the month of ice. The poets sing of December with a shiver. They remind us of the bitter blasts which blow

“In the depths of drear December
When the white doth hide the green.”

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When our Quaker poet sits down to write his "Snow Bound," he cannot keep away from December:

"The sun that brief December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray,
And darkly circled, gave at noon
A sadder light than fading moon."

When Shakespeare wishes to contrast the heat of summer with its opposite, his muse promptly suggests "December snow." Just as roses are the accepted symbol of June, so are snowdrifts the emblem of the last month of the year.

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And in this month of snow there burns a fire—Christmas—the warmest, most radiant, most glorious of all the days. One cannot think of Christmas without feeling a growing warmth around the heart. Who ever thought of Christmas with a shiver? It is swayed and bent by icy blasts, but we forget the blasts when we think of Christmas. The snow is drifted round its door, but we do not mind the snow. It is summer time when we think of Christmas. Indeed Christmas is all the lovelier because of its bleak surround-

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ings. The Home nest never seems so cosy as when set in the branches of the December tempest. The Christmas tree has a heightened beauty because projected against a bank of white. Christmas is one of God's mighty works—it is his fire burning in the snow.

It was his son, Jesus of Nazareth, who kindled it long ago. The world was cold indeed when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The whole earth was wrapped in ice. Benumbing storms raged across the lands. Into the midst of our drear world-winter, there

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stepped this man with a heart of fire. "I am come to cast fire upon the earth," he said. He did it. In the heart of humanity he kindled a fire which for two thousand years has been burning brighter and brighter to the present hour. And the fire will go on burning until the ice has all been melted, and the atmosphere of every continent and of every island of the sea has been made rich with the fragrance of the flowers of Paradise. It is the world's most cheerful spectacle—this fire burning perennially in the snow.

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Our ability to celebrate Christmas in December is beautiful proof that we are citizens of a higher world. We are made of something more than dust. We are not bits and pieces of a physical machine, puppets played on and moulded solely by material forces. We are in the world, and yet above it. The planet has its weather, but we are independent of its weather, we can manufacture weather of our own. We can make bright days beneath leaden skies, we can cause roses to blossom in icy gales. We are

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not bond-servants of the seasons. They come and go according to laws which our little planet knows and honors, but we make seasons of our own. We can create June in the ice caves of winter, we can build December amidst the blossoms and perfumes of May. We can live in a world of light when the face of the sun is hidden. The sun floods the streets of the city, it cannot flood the streets of the soul. Icy winds sometimes blow across the fields, while fragrant zephyrs are blowing across the moors and meadows of the mind.

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The wind can pile the snow in drifts along the highway, it cannot toss a single snowflake into the chamber of the heart. We are above Nature. We are throned monarchs of the world and the year. Christmas bears witness to the fact that we are related to the Higher Powers. We are miracle workers. We can do things which the cosmic forces cannot do. We can cause fire to burn in the snow.

Did you ever ask yourself why it always becomes balmy at Christmas time? No matter what the thermometer says, the weather is

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genial on Christmas. The thermometer is a stupid thing. It does not know the A B C's of life. It cannot tell the temperature of the world in which people live. It reports the condition of the physical atmosphere, but it knows nothing about the temperature of the soul. On Christmas morning, therefore, nobody pays attention to the thermometer. Everybody knows that no matter what the thermometer may say, the weather is ideal. The thermometer is an expert on snow, but the fire in the snow is beyond

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it. The snow is of the earth earthy, the Christmas fire is a visitor from heaven.

If you ask why it is so summer-like at Christmas, the answer is, human hearts have come closer together. Heat in the human world is created by the touching of hearts. When one wishes to make a fire on the hearth, he brings combustibles together. If he wishes a small fire, he brings few, if he wishes a big fire, he brings many. But one cannot build a fire out of one combustible alone. Even a pine stick

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does not like to burn by itself. It will, if coaxed and encouraged, make the attempt, but the progress is slow, and the pine stick is likely to fall into a bad humor, and to say in a puff of black smoke, "I am going to quit!" If you bring two sticks together, then both are encouraged. One helps the other, and the labor is lightened. But even two sticks have many discouragements, and unless the wind gives them many a lift, they are likely to falter, and at last give up altogether. Every one has seen two sticks

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struggle, and stumble, and finally sink down in despair. But add a third stick and success is almost certain. Add a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth, and every doubt is extinguished. Now throw on a whole armful of sticks, and the victory is immediate and glorious. Every stick exults and sings at its work, and the flames leap up the chimney with a great shout of red laughter.

The Christmas fire is built out of people. The Christmas blaze is created by the union of hearts. Nobody can celebrate Christmas

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alone. A Christmas in solitude is unthinkable. Even men in prison do not stay in prison on Christmas. On that day an angel of the Lord stands by the prisoner in his cell, and the iron gate opens of its own accord, and the soul of the prisoner goes out to hold communion with some other soul far away. It is only when two or three are gathered together, that the Christmas fire becomes possible. The temperature of the spirit world rises whenever two hearts approach each other, and Christmas day is tropical because so many hearts have met.

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At Christmas time, parents come closer to their children, and children come closer to their parents than at any other season of the year. When are hugs so abundant, and kisses so spontaneous as in those frigid days which lie in front of Christmas? What endless thinking and planning and dreaming! Every thought is a thought of good will. Every plan is a plan framed by affection. Every dream is made luminous by love. No wonder the temperature rises! Brothers and sisters come closer together. They

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may have had misunderstandings in October, and quarrels in November, but all these are melted and disappear in December. A quarrel melts in December like a snowball in June.

It is not only brothers and sisters who come closer together, but also uncles and aunts, and grandparents and cousins. It is amazing how large the family becomes at Christmas. And the bigger, the better. Small dinner parties are allowable on ordinary days, but not on Christmas. It requires

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a numerous company to build an ideal fire in the snow.

There are always more persons present than one can count in the body. Christmas is a kind, generous, and charitable time. The heart expands at Christmas. The sympathies take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the town, and hover over the outer edges of one's social world. Little boys and girls whom we have never thought of all year, come trooping into the mind at Christmas; and needy men and women whom we have

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known and almost forgotten, rise up before the mind's eye at Christmas. All mankind becomes human at Christmas. Everybody seems to be related to us, and we feel related to everybody else. The whole human race is suddenly transformed into one huge family, and we slide down deeper into the sweet meanings of love. This meeting of hearts causes a change in the climate. The gulf stream swings inward, and the whole continent of our life is covered with tropical bloom. Our prejudices and antipathies and

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resentments, which lie through the summer like huge snow-banks in the heart's shady places, all melt and disappear in December. It is too sultry for them at Christmas.

On Christmas our old friends all visit us. They are scattered over the world. They are separated from us, some of them by thousands of miles, but in spite of the distance they all come back. And strange to say we have time to see them. On many days we are too busy to commune with our friends. Our tasks and our

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cares crowd them out of our thought. But on Christmas we have no tasks, and our cares are at an end, and there is abundance of time to make merry with those we love. Just as an armful of fagots thrown upon the embers on the hearth, causes a new flash of flame, so do memories thrown upon the embers of the mind, increase the heat and the radiance of life. It is always a pleasanter world after we have thought a while of our friends.

Thinking even about our enemies does not chill us—not at

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Christmas. They do not seem so hateful or so odious when we look at them through the glow of the Christmas fire. There were days, when to think of them, tore old wounds open, and spread a darkness across the world; but it is otherwise at Christmas. In front of the Christmas fire, we can see things which are scarcely visible on common days. We can see good points in our foes and blemishes in ourselves. We can realize that they are not wholly in the wrong, and that we are not altogether in the right. We can, at

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Christmas, see that we too were hotheaded and unreasonable. We fall to wondering how we ever came to say the things we did, and how we ever came to be so stubborn and foolish as we were. The Christmas fire sets the mind a-roaming, and before one is aware just where he is, he has stumbled upon an ancient prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That is not an easy prayer to offer at any time, in any place, but nowhere do the lips so readily repeat those heavenly syllables as in 'front of the Christ-

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mas fire. If the thought of one's friends is able to raise the temperature of the world, the kindly thought of one's enemies is able to lift it higher still. The forgiveness of those who hate us and who have done us grievous wrong, has in it a higher intensity of heat than any other action of the soul. It is always summer around the heart which has mastered the high art of forgiving. Christmas is preeminently the day for banishing old feuds and grudges, and shaking hands across chasms worn deep and wide by years of suspi-

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cion and ill-will. A man ought to be able to forgive the worst of his enemies on Christmas.

“We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us
all to render
The deeds of mercy.”

An act of forgiveness in a world like this is a celestial fire blazing in the snow.

It is a cold, cold world, so men have said for many a year, and they have spoken truly. Why is the world so cold? It is because hearts are not together. Let husband and wife drift apart, and

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there comes at once a touch of winter into the air. The children feel it, and their young hearts too are chilled. Home is no longer home when hearts are not at one. Christmas comes once a year, like an angel from the court of heaven, to reconcile hearts which have become estranged, and to sweeten spirits which experience has made bitter. It may be that the home has become cold as the Arctic Sea, and that the promises of the earlier years have all, like so many blossoms, been covered deep with snow. But even so, there still is

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hope. Why should any heart become despairful when God makes it possible to kindle a fire in the snow?

It is in very truth a cold world. All the kingdoms of life are yet wrapped in ice. The industrial world has a climate like that which Peary found around the Pole. Why? Because hearts there are so far apart from one another. The capitalist is separated from the wage-earner by a chasm, and the employé is miles away from the employer. It is because their hearts do not touch,

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that feelings are frigid and relations are strained. Must the present tragedy continue? Must capital and labor everlastingly glare at one another out of eyes filled with suspicion and hate? Must the ice-age last forever? No! It is possible for men to come together. It is possible for them to understand and respect each other. It is easy—if men would only believe it—to kindle a fire in the snow.

The commercial world is buried under snowdrifts. Commerce has made thousands of hearts hard

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and cold. In multitudes of business men, the higher sentiments are all frozen. Icicles have formed at the very core of the heart. Bargain seeking and market grabbing have an effect on the climate. Buying and selling have a tendency to bring the temperature low. Is the business world hopeless? Are we to confess that it is a permanent province of the kingdom of frost? No! Buying and selling is a part of our Father's business, and it can be carried on to the advancement of all that is dear to mankind. The snowdrifts

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are deep, and the winds icy and fierce, but by God's grace it is possible to build a fire in the snow.

All Europe presents today a spectacle which appals. A continent has slipped back into the age of ice. The blossoms have perished. The grass is dead. The trees are naked. Vast armies, like huge glaciers of the geologic times, are grinding civilization to powder. How shall we account for the heart-breaking catastrophe? It has come about through fear and hate. The hearts of nations drifted apart. They were

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forced apart by foolish ambitions, and mistaken theories, and false ideals. Europe is today in the glacial epoch because she is held in the grip of twin demons, fear and hate. There is nothing in this world so cold as hate. It freezes the blood of men and of Empires. It paralyzes the native feelings of the soul. It converts the heart into ice. Under the influence of hate, men degenerate into barbarians and savages. This is a war of atrocities. Brutality and inhumanity flow from a heart that has grown cold.

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Is Europe then lost forever?
No! God reigns and loves, and
therefore the future is safe.
Christmas will come this year to
Europe, even through the snow.
Through the drifted and piled-up
fear and hate, it will make its
way to the courts of kings, to the
trenches where the soldiers are,
and to the homes of peasants
darkened by the shadow of death.
Even amid the European snow-
drifts there are fires burning in
the hearts of men and women and
little boys and girls to whom the
Son of God has communicated the

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secret and the rapture of good will. These hearts are burning under every flag, and some day they will come together, and the world shall behold a glorious conflagration in the snow. The glaciers are only for a season. They cannot be pulverized by the machinery of battle: they will be melted by the fire which the good God knows how to kindle from material he will gather from the snow.

What is our human life but one short year—the year ending in a bleak and chill December?

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“What should we speak of
When we are old as you? When we
shall hear
The rain and wind beat dark Decem-
ber?”

Let us speak together of the
love of God, made manifest in
Jesus Christ his Son. Let us
speak often of all the wondrous
way in which he has led us through
the years, and let us dream of the
things in the world of light pre-
pared for those who love him.
Let us tell again on each succeed-
ing Christmas day, the old, old
story of the baby who was born
in Bethlehem, and of the man

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who died upon the cross, and of how a loving God through this Man upon the cross keeps pleading with us through all the years to love and serve one another. And thus shall we create summer in our last December, and to the very end keep a fire burning in the snow.

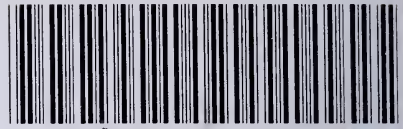
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